

(Pl. 15a). Here there are no puzzling features demanding explanation; no picture could be more self-sufficient. The fame of Apelles' 'Aphrodite Anadyomene' and the *ekphrasis* in Poliziano's *Giostra* may really explain the picture completely. But do they? Only recently a critic has stressed the exceptional character of such a subject in the *quattrocento*. "One might call the Birth of Venus the Rebirth (*Rinascita*) of Venus, because with that picture the most wily and the most seducing of the pagan demoniac powers, one of the most beautiful and most vital personalities of the Olympus returned to European art. But Botticelli had risked too much. Fra Girolamo Savonarola declared war on that new idolatry and Sandro did bitter penance."¹ This interpretation would certainly clash with all our previous notions. If the 'Primavera' was painted for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, so was the 'Birth of Venus,' and if Ficino's pupil really saw the Goddess in such a sinister light, our interpretation of Botticelli's mythologies would be refuted. But there is no need for such an assumption. If Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco was taught to see in the Venus of the 'Primavera' an embodiment of *Humanitas*, Ficinian exegesis may also have initiated him into the spiritual *significatio* of the 'Birth of Venus.'

In his commentary on Plato's *Philebus* Ficino explains the myth of Venus' birth in his customary manner as a cosmogonic mystery. It stands for the birth of beauty within the Neoplatonic system of emanations:

Masilio
Ficino is
Botticelli's
patron.

"The story told by Hesiod in the theogony of how Saturn castrated Heaven and threw the testicles into the sea, out of the agitated foam of which Venus was born, we should perhaps understand as referring to the potential fecundity of all things which lies latent in the first principle. This the divine spirit drinks and first unfolds within himself; after which he pours it forth into the soul and matter, which is called the sea, because of the motion, time, and humour of generation. As soon as the soul is thus fertilized, it creates Beauty within itself; by an upward movement of conversion towards supra-intelligible things; and by a downward movement, it gives birth to the charm of sensible things in matter. This conversion into Beauty and its birth from the soul is called Venus. And as in all aspects and in all generation of Beauty there is pleasure, and as all generation is from the soul, which is called Venus, many thought that Venus herself was Pleasure."²

After which Ficino proceeds to give a spiritualized interpretation of Pleasure.

Are we to think of this tortuous passage as we stand before the picture in the Uffizi? We need hardly remember all its twists and turns³ but some such



¹ Eckart Peterich, "Gli Dei Pagani nell' Arte Christiana," *La Rinascita*, V, 1942, p. 56.

² Ficino, *ed. cit.*, p. 1217.

³ Pico, in his commentary to Benivieni's *Canzone d'Amore*, II, 17, gives a more simplified version of the same interpretation: "Seguendo adunque la esposizione da noi addotta, habbiamo ad dire che tutto quello che comunica Celio à Saturno, cioè quella

plenitudine delle idee laquale descende da Dio nella mente, sono e testicoli di Celio, perochè separati quelli da esso, rimane sterile, et non è più generativo, cascono questi testicoli nel mare, cioè nella natura informe Angelica, et come prima con quella si congiungano nasce essa Venere, laquale come è detto, e quello decore, quello ornato, et quella gratia, resultante della varietà di quelle idee,